

Friends of E.1027

# FINANCIAL TIMES



## Tagged by Le Corbusier

*Eileen Gray's E1027 house prompted one of modernism's most bizarre episodes.  
Its restoration is long overdue, writes Edwin Heathcote*

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It is one of the most extraordinary stories in modern architecture. The house that was one of the most perfect products of the modern movement, the cryptically christened E1027, was designed by Eileen Gray, an Anglo-Irish designer, a woman in a man's world who had been excluded by the artistic and avant-garde establishment.

Le Corbusier, the leader of that architectural avant-garde, was either in love with or incensed by the presence of this house and scrawled a series of sexually charged murals to Gray's great chagrin. She was slightly consoled when the German soldiers who later occupied the villa used the abstracted figures for target practice. The house that had tormented him as he had tormented it was perhaps the last thing Le Corbusier ever saw – he drowned in the sea outside in 1965. For years it lay abandoned, one of the great houses of the modern era desecrated in one of the countries that most valued its modernist past – while Le Corbusier's houses were lovingly turned into temples, museums of modernity.

It is now impossible to imagine that Gray went almost entirely unlauded in her lifetime. In 2009 a Dragon chair by Gray sold at Christie's in Paris for £19m – becoming the world's most expensive piece of modern design. Her distinctive designs for tables and chairs have now become ubiquitous, familiar from hotel foyers, show homes and corporate lobbies. She is revered as one of the most influential and most modern of the modernists and the restoration of her house, which she began building with her lover, the Romanian architect and critic Jean Badovici, in 1924, is likely to reinforce her reputation as a pioneer.

Gray's own story is as unusual as the story of her subsequent revival. She was born into a wealthy family in County Wexford in 1878 and grew up between Ireland and London, where she studied art at the Slade. Directionless after leaving art school, she befriended the Japanese lacquerer Sugawara and learnt the craft from him. After shuttling between the British and French capitals she finally settled in Paris in 1907 and began designing furniture and interiors from her Rue Bonaparte apartment and studio. Her early work was a kind of art deco but not the familiar

**History** Above, clockwise from top left: the original interior of E1027; Eileen Gray in Paris, 1926; the sunlit rooms of E1027; the house on its *piloti*; murals by Le Corbusier; one of his more colourful paintings. Below: Gray's 'Dragons' armchair, c.1917-19; Le Corbusier, his wife Yvonne and Jean Badovici in E1027

Lucien Herve/Arteria/View, Berenice Abbott, Luc Boegly/Arteria/View, M.Bougot/Friends of E1027/Agence Pierre-Antoine Gatiel/ACMH, Christie's Images/Bridgeman, FLC/DACS

geometric, cubist, Aztec-influenced Hollywood dream we are used to thinking of, rather a humanised, exotic, almost organic style. It was this humanity that continued to define her work, differentiating itself from the cool detachment of the prevailing ideal of functionalism.

In 1925 Gray was persuaded by Badovici to build a summer house. The couple found a site at Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, on the Côte d'Azur near Monaco, and Gray, who had no architectural training at all, designed one of the most innovative and beautiful houses of the 20th century. The structure was elevated on *piloti* – the slender white columns that Le Corbusier had made famous – its spaces flowing fluidly into each other and out on to terraces and balconies so that the expansive rooms melted into the warm Mediterranean air at their edges. The house's white walls and strong horizontals, its decks and sinuous handrails and its sparse, considered metal furniture made it look like a moored ship, a vessel floating between landscape and sea.

Gray gave the house the name E1027, which, although it sounds like a modern food additive, actually encoded the lovers' initials: E for Eileen with the number indicating the alphabetical positions of the first letters of Jean (10), 2 (Badovici) and 7 (Gray), a romantic entwining of the names, the apparently rational masking the warm and passionate.

The couple parted in 1932 and Badovici kept E1027. In the meantime the Paris-based Swiss architect Le Corbusier, the most influential designer and theorist of the era and a frequent visitor at the house (there are photos of the three together, Gray looking ill at ease), had become increasingly seduced by its image, which was, frankly, as radical and elegant as anything he himself had done.

In the years between 1938 and 1940 Le Corbusier, uninvited, painted a series of murals (in his characteristic sub-Picasso style) on the lower walls of the house. He painted, as was his custom, in the nude. When Gray found out she was appalled. This odd episode is often taken as an act of sexual aggression, a defacement caused by jealousy. Le Corbusier later built himself a *cabanon*, a primitive, ascetic-in-the-extreme log cabin – the only building he ever designed for himself. He subse-



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quently built a hostel on the hillside above the site of E1027, as if not satisfied until he could dominate it, bestride it completely. In 1965 he would also die here, his body being found on the beach below, possibly having suffered a heart attack while swimming, possibly having committed suicide.

The story of the house continued. A later owner (Badovici died in 1956), Peter Kägi, was murdered there by his gardener in 1986. After falling into disrepair and dereliction, this extraordinary property is being restored by the Conservatoire du Littoral, the local and municipal authorities and a charity being spearheaded by expat Englishman Michael Likierman, who told me he was “looking for a restoration project” and has been a passionate and forceful promoter of the scheme.

The furniture, which the ill-fated Kägi sold, is being donated by another (adopted) Englishman, the furniture manufacturer and retailer Zeev Aram, who was responsible for reviving Gray’s reputation at a time when she was entirely forgotten.

I spoke to him about his encounters with the elderly designer. “There had been an article in *Domus* by Joseph Rykwert [in 1968] about Gray and it had stuck in my mind. Then, in 1972, there was a small exhibition at the Heinz Gallery. I got in touch with her and, in 1973, she came to the showroom. We hit it off.”

As the only person I know who met Gray and knew her well, I asked Aram the one

question which I’ve never found a proper answer for in all the books I’ve read – what was she like?

“She was slightly quizzical,” Aram replies. “A little bewildered, if I can say that. Don’t forget that like any person who knows the value of their work and then is literally forgotten she was a little bemused by my interest in her work. No matter how generous a soul she might have been with all the credit being given to her contemporaries she must have asked ‘why not me?’.”

“She was small and frail when I met her,” he continues, “with short curly hair and a dead eye, which she hid behind dark glasses. But she was always so elegant, in a *sotto voce* way, if I can say that. Everything she wore was beautifully tailored: a simple skirt and blouse and the only jewellery she wore was a subtle art deco brooch. With that one good eye she saw more than young architects with their four eyes. I thank God she lived long enough for me to be able to meet her – she was wise and wonderful. I was enthralled, and she was grateful.”

Grateful because Aram began to put into production Gray’s exquisite designs for furniture that had never been produced except in small runs for her own use or private commissions. It was the production of that furniture, notably the adjustable-height side table she designed for E1027 that has become one of the most familiar – and most ripped-off – pieces of modernist design and the Bibendum Chair (named after the Michelin Man), which rescued Gray from obscurity and ensured her place in the pantheon of modernist greats beside Mies van der Rohe, Marcel Breuer – and Le Corbusier.

Ultimately Gray’s disagreement with the Swiss architect pivoted around his most famous dictum that “The house is a machine for living in”. For Gray it was not a machine, it was a house. The machines of modernism, including the morass of concrete housing estates inspired by Le Corbusier’s vision and the blank rows of corporate boxes that disfigure the world’s commercial centres, have shown Gray to be right. When E1027 opens again next year after its long restoration we will, at last, be able to see exactly how and why.

*Edwin Heathcote is the FT’s architecture critic*

